

Journal of Dracula Studies

Volume 10 2008

Article 5

2008

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Katharina Mewald

University of Vienna, Austria

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Recommended Citation

Mewald, Katharina (2008) "The Emancipation of Mina? The Portrayal of Mina in Stoker's Dracula and Coppola's Bram Stoker's Dracula," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 10 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol10/iss1/5>

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The Emancipation of Mina? The Portrayal of Mina in Stoker's Dracula and Coppola's Bram Stoker's Dracula

Cover Page Footnote

Katharina Mewald is a research assistant at the Department of English at the University of Vienna. Her research interests are Scottish and North American Studies as well as Film Studies.

The Emancipation of Mina? The Portrayal of Mina in Stoker's *Dracula* and Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*

Katharina Mewald

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Over the last decades, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been reworked and translated into film versions – or at least provided inspiration for films – hundreds of times. Of the film versions which refer to Stoker as an important inspiration, Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) claims a very high degree of fidelity to its literary source. An analysis of Stoker's novel and the film version by Coppola reveals crucial differences in the portrayal of characters, especially with respect to Mina (Murray) Harker. A central question is how far the depictions of Mina in the novel and film diverge. Even though he attempted an essentially faithful rendition, Coppola made one far-reaching alteration to Stoker's original: the inclusion of the romance between Mina and Dracula, based on the identification of Mina as Dracula's long-lost bride, Elisabeta. The reason for this may be found in economic considerations, which are likely to have demanded the film to be made attractive to a wider audience than the horror movie-goers. Additionally, it has been argued that Mina has been adapted to reflect the more modern and emancipated gender roles of women today, a contention that is open to challenge.

In Stoker's novel, Mina is presented as the prototype of the ideal Victorian woman. Almost her whole existence is devoted to her future husband and she aspires to become a good wife and mother, the "angel of the house." Jonathan Harker, during his business in Transylvania, refers to her only sporadically, in connection with cooking recipes and the like, suggesting her preoccupation with marriage and the household. Also in the correspondence between Mina and her friend Lucy Westenra, marriage is a frequent topic and seems to be everything they dream of. When Mina is finally married to Jonathan, she writes in her diary that she is "the happiest woman in all the wide world" and that her life will consist of "love and duty for all the days of [her] life" (*Dracula* 140).¹ This focus on marriage is linked to her strong sense of duty towards others and, most of all, Jonathan. When writing about being married, she mentions the "grave and sweet responsibilities [she has] taken upon [herself]" (139). This sense of duty can be observed in her motivation for writing her diary, which is to practise her shorthand and typewriting skills in order to be useful to her husband. She also learns the train timetable by heart "so that [she] may help Jonathan in case he is in a hurry" (241). Furthermore,

¹ All references to *Dracula* are to the 1993 Penguin Classics edition.

she considers it her duty to support her husband emotionally: "I do believe that if he had not had me to lean on and to support him he would have sunk down" (223). Her sense of duty also entails the keeping up of appearances. An assistant schoolmistress who teaches etiquette to young girls, she is eager to be dressed adequately and behave properly at all times. During Lucy's sleepwalking episode in Whitby, Mina gives her friend her own shoes and then dabs her own feet in mud so that passers-by will not notice her being barefoot. Also the fact that Mina deduces that Lucy cannot be sleepwalking outside the house because she is only wearing a nightdress comically underlines this characteristic trait. However, Mina obviously senses that these norms are somewhat too strict, as she writes that "you can't go on for some years teaching etiquette and decorum to other girls without the *pedantry* of it biting into yourself" (222 emphasis mine)² and decides to allow Jonathan to take her arm in the street.

Another factor in Mina's characterization is her strong and often overflowing emotionality. Mina seems to have a disposition to cry; for example when the old man she meets in Whitby talks of his own death, she writes that "It all touched [her], and upset [her] very much" (100). One time she admits to becoming hysterical (238) when talking to Van Helsing. However, her fit of hysterics is far less severe than that of Van Helsing earlier. This is noteworthy, since women were the ones who were supposed to suffer most from hysterics. Later on, this reversal of gender roles is taken further when, as soon as the male characters encounter emotional crises, Mina remains the stable one. After comforting one of the men she writes in her diary that crying often helps, yet she herself has stopped crying in order to support the men. She even keeps up superficial cheerfulness when she herself is worried. She decides to repress her own feelings in order to support and comfort the male characters. Her mothering instinct therefore establishes her as an emotional haven and a source of faith for the men. She writes in her diary, "[T]here is something in woman's nature that makes a man free to break down before her ... without feeling it derogatory to his manhood" (294-5). Thus, she represents the secure home that Victorian men expected to find in women.

Further characteristics of Stoker's Mina befitting her image as the prototypical Victorian woman are her chastity and modesty. Contrary to Lucy with her polygamist tendencies (i.e. desiring to marry three men), Mina is decidedly innocent and morally adequate. She does not exhibit any kind of physical attraction towards Jonathan (not to mention any other person). Her chastity is only once questioned, when she writes about Dracula's seduction and mentions that she "did not want to hinder him" (370). Also, Mina is never envious of Lucy's beauty and popularity with men but rather admires her friend. Her intelligence and practical skills contribute to the usefulness that is expected of Victorian women. She knows shorthand and typewriting, but most importantly, she has knowledge of Cesare Lombroso's theories about criminals (to be discussed later). Though Van Helsing notices her outstanding intelligence, she herself seems to lack self-

² The connection of decorum and etiquette and the notion of biting in this utterance is noteworthy, since it implies that not only Dracula bites his victims but also excessively strict Victorian norms "bite into" women.

confidence, as can be observed in her statement that “speaking to this great, learned man, [Van Helsing] [she] began to fear that he would think [her] a weak fool” (240). Furthermore, Mina keeps reproaching herself in her diary for being silly and naïve. A consequence of her own moderation is the fact that she seems to identify herself very much with her husband’s success. Jonathan mentions in his diary that Mina would not like him to be called a clerk even though he is already a solicitor: “Solicitor’s clerk! Mina would not like that. Solicitor” (25). Later, in her own diary, Mina writes that she is proud to see her Jonathan “rising to the height of his advancement” (231).

Mina, as the ideal Victorian woman, serves as an example of the prevailing gender roles at the time. Women were supposed to marry, have (preferably male) children and support their husbands. Lucy is also influenced by these norms, as she is disappointed not to have received a proposal at “almost twenty.” Generally, Mina and Lucy are the women of *Dracula* “upon whom the men project the ideals of Victorian womanhood” (Rosenberg 8). At the time *Dracula* was written, the emergence of the “New Woman” was challenging traditional gender roles. As Punter and Byron mention, the New Woman was characterized by her “demands for both social and sexual autonomy” (231), which includes sexual independence and taking up male professions. The women in *Dracula*, however, ridicule the New Woman, a kind of behaviour that seems to have been conditioned by the male characters’ opinion. Mina and Lucy are decidedly not fully autonomous. On the contrary. Mina is a schoolmistress, an “accepted occupation for women of the period” (Rosenberg 9), and her goal is to follow the traditional Victorian role model. Yet, if we take Mina’s important part in hunting Dracula and Lucy’s flirtatious behavior into account, we might establish the argument that both Mina and Lucy exhibit tendencies that hint at social (Mina) and sexual (Lucy) autonomy. Therefore, each of Stoker’s women finds her own way of breaking up/with Victorian gender roles, a more moderate way of emancipation than the radical feminism of the New Woman.

Apart from fulfilling the function of representing the prototype of the ideal Victorian Woman in Stoker’s novel, Mina has important functions with regard to the male characters. By biting Mina and forcing her to drink his blood, Dracula mocks the lack of manhood of Jonathan, who is lying impotently next to them. Thus, Dracula asserts his power over the male characters by seducing and assimilating the female characters. Yet, as far as the hunting of Dracula is concerned, Mina is the one who significantly furthers his capture by noticing his physiognomic features as those of a criminal. She is aware of the theories of Lombroso,³ a doctor and owner of an insane asylum who was of the opinion that criminals could be recognized by their appearance (e.g. shape of teeth).⁴ Thus, although we learn that Jonathan also knows about these theories, it is Mina who applies them to the Count. Additionally, Mina has the crucial function of a distributor of information, since she reads and types all diaries and documents of the characters

3 Cf. Punter 2000.

4 For more information on Lombroso and his theories see
<http://www.museocriminologico.it/lombroso_1_uk.htm> 02.03.2008 and
<<http://www.d.umn.edu/~jhamlin1/lombroso.html>> 02.03.2008.

involved. Only this ordering and distribution of information makes the pursuit and destruction of Dracula possible.

Let us now turn to the characterization of Mina in Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Filmic characterization differs somewhat from that of literary texts, as it uses camera movement, figure positioning, mise-en-scene (a spatial representation of meaning) and camera, rather than the linear mode of telling. As McFarlane points out,

The camera in this sense becomes the narrator by, for instance, focusing on such aspects of mise-en-scene as the way actors look, move, gesture, or are costumed, or on the ways in which they are positioned in a scene or on how they are photographed. (17)

Taking into account this disparity, a reasonable comparison needs to examine both what is conveyed (i.e. character in our case) and how it is conveyed (i.e. characterization).

In Coppola's film we first meet Mina when Jonathan tells her that he has to go to Transylvania. She is wearing a blue dress buttoned up to the collar and her hair is pinned up. These features, together with her affectionate behavior, paint a picture of her as virtuous, devoted, and faithful. This is in line with how she is introduced in the novel. Moreover, when writing her diary on her typewriter later, Coppola's Mina regularly mentions marriage and reminds the viewer of her devotion to Jonathan. Elsewhere in the film, Mina's virtuous character is further strengthened by contrasting her to the coquettish Lucy, of whom Mina has this to say: "Lucy is a virtuous girl but I admit that her free way of speaking shocks me sometimes." While Mina's costume and hair-style depict her as very innocent and pure, Lucy wears dresses that show her bare shoulders and back, and her hair is loose and wild.

On a superficial level, Coppola's film seems to mirror the Victorian gender roles and norms observed in Stoker. Yet, even before the love plot between Mina and Dracula starts, we detect a difference in Mina's behavior. This undercurrent can be observed early, in the first scene in which we encounter Mina saying goodbye to Jonathan as he leaves for Transylvania. At the end of the scene, as Jonathan turns to leave, Mina drags him onto a bench and kisses him, a much more sexually aggressive action than we would have expected. Her sexualized behavior when she kisses him already anticipates deeper drives, which will ultimately overrule her will and make her beg Dracula to make her a vampire. Additionally, the strange end of the scene with peacock feathers obscuring the frame and the bewildering kind of music foreshadows the couple's future suffering.

At one point, Mina confesses that she admires Lucy's success with men, once again a sign that behind her facade of virtue there linger secret wishes and passions. In the same scene Coppola also has Dracula's shadow move over Lucy and Mina, emphasizing their proneness to succumb to sexual passion, embodied by the figure of the vampire. Also during the scene in which she and Lucy dance in the rain, there is a lesbian kiss, displaying the film's rather liberal interpretation of Stoker's novel (in which such a scene does not exist and seems impossible). Later, when Mina's romance with the Count

develops, she starts to break free from moral constraints, for instance by displaying sexual desire and being unfaithful to her fiancé and husband. Although Lucy seems to be the one who would more readily submit to Dracula's seduction, Mina also finally yields to his embrace.

After Mina meets Prince Vlad, the younger Count Dracula, she becomes more and more fascinated with him, and starts to change significantly. When on her way to Romania to marry Jonathan, she expresses doubts about her own moral worth: "Perhaps I'm a bad, inconstant woman." The prince remains in her thoughts and after she and her new husband return to London, she desires to meet Vlad again. During the pursuit of Dracula in Transylvania, finally, Mina has completed the transformation to a vampire. This is conveyed primarily by costume and hair: she wears a dark dress of rich fabric with considerable cleavage and her hair flows freely. Additionally, Coppola has her address Dracula as "my love" several times and, most importantly, gives her a scene in which she, formerly powerless and submissive, uses her new power to raise a storm to further Dracula's flight to his castle.

A pivotal scene in the movie (significantly absent from the novel) is what I term the "Absinthe Scene." Mina and the young Dracula meet in a café. This meeting is a key scene in the plot of the love relationship between the two characters: it establishes Mina as Elisabeta's reincarnation and foretells her destiny with Dracula. Coppola's major alteration to Stoker's plot, the romance between these two characters, operates on a covert level in Mina's characterization and Dracula's new-found youth. But it also overtly connects with the frame scenes of the film: at the beginning, the depiction of Vlad the Impaler, and at the end, with Dracula and his beloved re-entering the chapel where he is relieved of his curse. This circular structure is strengthened by the use of similar images of the two lovers in front of the altar. These two scenes together with the Absinthe Scene form a new frame onto which Stoker's story is overlaid.

The Absinthe Scene starts with a series of extreme close-ups linked by dissolves. This technique creates a feeling of drunkenness or dizziness that has a certain dream-like quality to it and could be interpreted as point-of-view shots of the drugged Mina. These close-ups and extreme close-ups focus on the eyes of the characters, establishing a close spiritual connection between them. The use of extreme close-ups on Mina's mouth when she is licking the sugar cube creates a very sensual atmosphere and hints at great intimacy. Another factor in these shots that emphasizes seclusion and intimacy is the semi-transparent wall behind the table through which we can see shadows of dancing couples. Adding to the romantic and luring atmosphere is the low-key lighting with its warm colours, and the mise-en-scene which features luxurious chairs and goblets, a chandelier, exotic plants, and candles.

Somewhat delayed by the close-ups, we are presented with the establishing shot, a long shot that introduces the setting and shows us the costumes. Mina, contrary to her previous appearance, wears a blood-red dress with considerable cleavage and rich jewellery, hinting at her transformation into Dracula's sensual lover. Additionally, Mina's hair is no longer pinned up but flows in luxurious waves. They talk about Transylvania and Mina describes the country very vividly, which surprises Dracula: "You

describe my home as if you had seen it first-hand.” This sequence is rendered in a medium close-up with Mina’s face on the right side of the frame and superimpositions of forests, flowers, and buildings on the left side. Thus, the superimpositions function like a vision of Mina’s past life as Elisabeta. This shot is the first hint that she is Elisabeta reincarnated. During Dracula’s words (cf. above) the extradiegetic sound, i.e. the music, changes to the love theme to signify the realization just mentioned. The next hint follows closely, when Mina says that Dracula’s voice is familiar to her and that it comforts her when she is alone. The shot type used adds important emphasis to the scene’s focus, i.e. Mina as Elisabeta’s reincarnation, as Mina’s face is prominent, showing her inner processes of realization. The scene develops in a similar way, the figure of Mina prominently in front, becoming more and more aware of her “true” identity, and Dracula in the back, remembering the sorrow of losing his wife. During this process, several superimpositions of Elisabeta and Dracula appear between the two figures, to link them visually as well as verbally. The climax of the scene is somewhat strange, since instead of kissing (which has to be reserved for the ultimate seduction scene) Mina and Dracula seem to comfort each other. Dracula’s kiss on her forehead seems to express his deep appreciation of their “reunion.”

This major change in Stoker’s plot places the two characters into very different functional positions as far as the narrative is concerned. Mina is no longer a perfect representative of the ideal Victorian woman but has become fully susceptible to Dracula’s advances. As Punter asserts, “Mina struggles to be with Dracula rather than working against him as linchpin of the efforts of the ‘Crew of Light’” (189). This is most noticeable when she conjures up clouds to help Dracula escape the pursuers. More importantly, however, the character of Mina in Coppola’s film has another function, that is, that of the reincarnation of Elisabeta. The romantic plot between Mina and Dracula is consequently a story of “star-crossed lovers” struggling for union. Thus, Mina has the important dual function of liberating the “hero,” with whom the audience sympathizes, from his fate, and liberating the world from a menacing monster – the latter seemingly of lesser importance. Consequently, Mina is the agent of eternal love that solves all problems.

What was the motivation for such a radical change? Coppola explains it as follows: “The idea that love can conquer death, or worse than death – that she can actually give back to the vampire his lost soul” (Coppola & Hart 5). This explanation, however, most likely conceals the basic reason – profit. Critics have pointed out that presenting Dracula as an attractive but most of all “tragic figure searching for his long lost love” (Rottenbacher 34) ensures a far greater audience than if he is just a monster. Austin notes that audiences for horror movies are predominantly male (14). Consequently, the film was made attractive to a broader audience base by making it interesting for each group as “the latest creation of an auteur, a star vehicle ... a reworking of a popular myth, and adaptation of a literary ‘classic,’ as horror, art film, or romance” (114). Furthermore, he mentions that the target audience segments of filmmakers in the last decades are “mainstream” and infrequent cinemagoers and especially women. The resulting orientation towards female audiences has led to a boom in women protagonists

and “new emphases on emotional relationships” (117). In other words, the male part of the target group is attracted by the horror-quality of the film, while the female part identifies with the “strong” female protagonist and the love relationship. Another advantage of injecting romance into what is essentially a horror story is that Dracula is no longer only a monster, but “a sex symbol” (Rottenbacher 36). Making Dracula more attractive plays an important role in achieving this phenomenon, and an attractive couple as star-crossed lovers guarantees audience interest, even more so if the theme is eternal love that conquers all. As Rottenbacher reminds us, “Sex, of course, is what sells” (36).

The effects of Coppola’s alterations have been treated in numerous secondary works and their conclusions underlined by audience interviews (cf. Holte). The main tenor of the film’s reception was of two kinds: those who appreciated the romance, and those who were disappointed at the lack of horror. The gender distributions amongst these two groups, however, showed that there was no absolute correlation between gender and genre preference. Not all women liked the inclusion of the love relationship, and some missed the horror. As Holte points out, “Coppola, despite the best of intentions, creates a work in which there is far more pity than fear; the sympathy finally overwhelms the repulsion” (85). Thus, the film fails to frighten and is consequently a compromise aiming to attract a broad audience rather than a horror movie. Another effect, common to *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* and several other recent horror films, is that the incorporation of romance seems to create a new film genre. Holte argues that “More recent adaptations ... depict Dracula as a romantic hero, and in doing so help establish a new narrative form, the dark romance” (xvii). Thus, we might be witnessing the emergence of a new genre that aims at satisfying multiple tastes and audience segments.

Coppola’s stated aim was to produce a faithful adaptation of Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, which was clearly indicated by the film’s title *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*. To some extent he has succeeded:

Many characters and incidents from Bram Stoker’s novel which have never before found their way onto the screen are included in Coppola’s version.... The narrative technique, at least in the first two thirds of the film, directly reflects Stoker’s epistolary style. Multiple strands of narrative ... are held together by voice-overs, captions, maps, visual and aural cues and links. The frequent, almost excessive, use of superimpositions and dissolves enables and enhances the depiction of multiple points of view. (Waltje 30)

Such a high degree of fidelity to character constellation and names, narrative transmission, and the main story-line, and most importantly the multiple points of view seems to justify the title. However, as McFarlane mentions,

Any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the film-maker’s reading of the original and to hope that it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers. Since such coincidence is unlikely, the fidelity approach seems doomed as an enterprise. (9)

It is worth noting that the question of fidelity is no longer the main focus of adaptation analysis. Indeed, as McFarlane points out, “There are many kinds of relations which may exist between film and literature, and fidelity is only one – and rarely the most exciting” (11). Today, scholars have turned to a less judgmental but more descriptive approach, that is, describing the nature of the relation between the film and its source, which can range from “transfer” (with the highest degree of fidelity possible) to “adaptation” (with changes) to a “free reworking.” Applying McFarlane’s typology, we might call Coppola’s film an adaptation, since he aimed at fidelity but made one very vital change to the story, involving Mina. This change has far-reaching impacts on the story, even if the remaining parts are rendered as faithfully as possible. The implications of Mina’s changing character functions are described by McFarlane as follows: “By observing these [character] functions ... one could determine whether the film-maker has aimed to preserve the underlying structure of the original or radically to rework it” (25).

It is clear that although Coppola was generally faithful to Stoker’s characters, he has entirely altered the underlying structure of the narrative by changing the function(s) of only one character. We can conclude that Mina’s portrayal in Coppola’s film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* takes Stoker’s Mina as a starting point, but departs from it in steps that become more and more significant towards the end of the film: Mina’s betrayal of her husband and her attempts to sabotage the men’s endeavor to kill Dracula.

One essential question remains. Do the alterations in Mina’s character make her an emancipated and a modern woman? Punter, for example, contends that Coppola has altered Mina’s character to adapt her to a modern feminist mindset (189). This line of argument, however, only makes sense at a surface level. A closer look at the two works makes it apparent that although Coppola has strengthened Mina’s role in making her part of the star-crossed-lovers and has given her supernatural powers, Mina seems to have exchanged one corset for another. She has moved from a woman (in Stoker’s novel) oppressed by Victorian norms to one that is merely a reincarnation of someone else (in the film), receiving a pre-determined identity and being ruled and oppressed by male power, Dracula’s in this case. Therefore, Punter’s argument has to be rejected on feminist grounds. Berner puts forward the main source of doubt that prevents us from calling Mina a truly emancipated character:

Natürlich ist Mina in diesem Film [*Bram Stoker’s Dracula*] einerseits eine sich emanzipierende Frauenfigur – sie emanzipiert sich in erster Linie gegenüber den Männern [sic], die sie schützen wollen – gleichzeitig aber erfüllt sie auch in diesem Film, sehr diffizil verpackt, männliche Wunschphantasien. (158)⁵

All in all, the Mina that was suppressed by social norms and strict moral rules in Stoker has turned into Coppola’s supposedly strong and emancipated character, who, upon

⁵ Translation: “In this film [*Bram Stoker’s Dracula*] Mina is of course a female character that becomes emancipated – she becomes emancipated in relation to the men who want to protect her –, but at the same time she also very subtly embodies male fantasies in this film.”

closer inspection, has merely swapped the entity by which she is determined. In Coppola's film she is even less emancipated than in Stoker's novel because she submits herself to the dominance of Dracula and henceforth gives up her own identity and takes up that of Elisabeta, even if this means her death; furthermore, this is not her decision but Dracula's. Mina therefore remains a "functioning object"⁶ (Berner 159) and Coppola merely changes the entity that governs her functioning from Victorian society to the character of Dracula. However, as Holte puts it, "perspective is everything" (87) and consequently Mina's character in Coppola's film could still be perceived as "modern," even though the assumptions underlying her characterization are connected to a negation of her individuality and self-determination. But what Coppola's film clearly is *not*, is the emancipation of Mina.

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⁶ Orig: "funktionierendes Objekt"

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